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ABSTRACT

A program was designed to reduce communication apprehension by using systematic desensitization, rhetoritherapy, and selected instructional strategies. Rhetoritherapy refers to the development of appropriate communication behaviors through a goal-setting procedure in which students learn to establish reasonable goals, ascertain behavior indicative of goal achievement, develop appropriate plans of actions, and carry out the plans for fulfilling their goals. An evaluation of this instructional program was conducted by comparing data on one class using the experimental program design to data on another class receiving regular instruction. The pre and posttest scores of communication apprehension, instructors' observations of student behavior, course evaluations, and students' self-reports revealed that the alternative instruction was superior to regular classroom instruction for students high in communication apprehension. (RL)

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A Skills Development and Apprehension Reduction Program for Communication Apprehensive/Reticent Students: An Alternative to Basic Course Instruction

by

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Project conducted with the
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Abstract

A program is described in which systematic desensitization, rhetoritherapy, and selected instructional strategies were combined to provide high communication apprehensive students with foundational confidence, skills, and principles in communication.

Pre- and post-PRCA scores, instructor observations of behavior, course evaluations, and self-reports of pre- and post-anxieties and skills reveal that for high communication apprehensive students alternative instruction was superior to regular classroom instruction.

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A Skills Development and Apprehension Reduction Program
for Communication Apprehensive/Reticent Students:
An Alternative to Basic Course Instruction

The fact has been firmly established that approximately 20% of the college students in the U.S. have high communication apprehension,[1] and that these students are at a disadvantage in academia,[2] in their future jobs,[3] and in their interaction with others.[4] Thus, taken together the evidence points to an extensive and serious problem--one that should be, and is, the concern of communication educators.

It is the negative effects of communication apprehension which behoove educators to seek out appropriate counteractive instruction for the communication apprehensives to counter those effects. Two general approaches are available: 1) develop skills so that any resident anxiety does not lead to negative behavior; 2) reduce the apprehension so that the students can engage in normal behavior or at least learn behavior as do nonapprehensive students. Indeed, the merits of both approaches have been well argued in the speech communication discipline, but effective programs utilizing both approaches are not well known. This paper briefly identifies methods used within each approach and describes a program in which the two approaches are combined for successful results.

Within the skills development approach the most common counter measure to high communication apprehension is regular classroom instruction in public speaking. That instruction, however, has not been shown to effectively reduce communication apprehension for those with high communication apprehension nor to effectively develop the skills of those with high communication apprehension. Although the level of communication apprehension has been shown to drop for a public speaking class,[5] evidence exists which indicates that for approximately 25% of the students communication apprehension is increased.[6] Such evidence is

collaborated by the reported observations of several communication scholars that for many high communication apprehensives public speaking courses increase communication apprehension.[7]

Some evidence shows that skills training in public speaking does reduce speech anxiety.[8] That evidence however, does not seem applicable to regular classroom instruction since it is based upon results from groups which were treated quite unlike regular students: the students were homogeneously grouped such that all had high speech anxiety, and the subjects were given special attention, a condition not available in regular classrooms. Furthermore, the studies only address speech anxiety, one state of communication apprehension, and therefore, one must be reluctant to generalize the results to a reduction in communication apprehension, especially since Weissberg and Lamb found that public speaking training did not reduce general anxiety.[9] The conviction that regular public speaking instruction is not sufficient for those with high communication apprehension has given rise to a number of alternative methods within each of the two approaches.

Within the approach of reducing anxiety, a popular method of reducing communication apprehension has been systematic desensitization. According to self-reports[10] and behavioral observations[11] systematic desensitization has been shown to be effective in reducing communication apprehension in most cases of state and trait communication apprehension.

Recently cognitive restructuring has been argued to be a superior alternative to systematic desensitization,[12] some evidence shows that it indeed has merit when applied to speech anxiety, one state of communication apprehension.[13] Cognitive restructuring combined with systematic desensitization is also a successful method of reducing speech anxiety.[14] Studies have not been reported to establish that these most recent methods are superior to systematic desensitization

for reducing trait communication apprehension.

Within the approach of developing communication skills so that anxiety, if remaining, does not lead to negative behavior, the most popular method is that known variously as rhetoritherapy, goal analysis, and reality therapy. By design this method does not focus only on high communication apprehension as the cause of communication deficiency, although anxiety is regarded as integral to reticent behavior.[15] The assumption underlying rhetoritherapy is that anxiety is incidental to the main problem of insufficient skills which are likely the indirect cause of anxiety in the first place; thus, rhetoritherapy attempts to develop appropriate behavior irrespective of whatever anxiety is present.[16] Positive, appropriate behavior is developed through a goal setting procedure in which the students learn to establish accomplishable goals, ascertain behavior indicative of goal achievement, develop appropriate plans of actions, and carry out the plans for goal fulfillment.[17]

Student self-reports and subjective instructor observations reveal that rhetoritherapy is successful in altering behavior and thereby reducing the likelihood of experiencing the negative results of communication apprehension.[18] However, the amount of communication apprehension reduction is not known. Studies which have tested skills training in specific matters of dating[19] and group discussion[20] show a reduction in performance anxiety. In addition, the above mentioned studies on reduction of speech anxiety by skills training suggest that skills training can lead to anxiety reduction.

To summarize the literature, both approaches to counteracting communication apprehension have merit. Although different in strategies, the two approaches may be combined to yield a balanced program. In other words, some students may indeed have resident skills although communication anxiety preempts their manifestation, and some students may indeed have communication anxiety because they

do not possess skills, and some students may have both insufficient skills and communication anxiety independent of the lack of skills. In an effort to maximize the possibility of counteracting the negative effects of high communication apprehension or reticence, both approaches may well be combined. Such a conclusion is supported by some researchers' observation that a combination of a variety of successful methods should be employed for the variety of students needing help.[21]

The remainder of this paper describes a program in which the two general approaches were combined. Employed in the program were systematic desensitization, rhetoritherapy, and selected instructional strategies which made the program a viable communication course for reticent/high communication apprehensive students.

The Program

In actuality, the program was an alternative course in communication. The students worked directly on resolving apprehension, developing skills, and learning principles within the three areas of interpersonal communication, group communication, and public speaking. The three areas were each emphasized since credit for mastering the alternative course was to be awarded in any one of the university's three introductory courses representing each of the surveyed areas. Although the special section did not have the depth of instruction in any one area as did the respective introductory course, we and the university recognized that the specialized instruction would be as meaningful to reticent students as would regular instruction to nonreticent students. Since we sought to introduce fundamental theory and to develop foundational skills in each area, we called the alternative instruction Foundations in Human Communication.

Course design and structure

The course was team taught by two instructors in order to utilize the expertise that one had obtained as an intern in retoritherapy and one had

obtained as an intern in systematic desensitization. The instructors met weekly to evaluate the previous class meeting, plan the next meeting, and discuss the progress of the students.

In order to fit the schedules of the majority of students, the class met in the evening from 7:00 to 10:00 once a week. Usually the first hour of the class was devoted to theoretical material and everyone met in the same room. For the second hour the class was split into two groups. One group received systematic desensitization while the other group engaged in a classroom activity related to the theory previously discussed. During the third hour of the class the two groups were reversed.

Screening

In order to identify reticent students or those with high communication apprehension, two screening methods were employed during the first lecture hours of the three introductory speech communication courses. These two methods are commonly employed in systematic desensitization and rhetoritherapy programs around the country.

The Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA)[22] was administered, and students with a score of 88 or above, the criterion for high communication apprehension, were contacted to attend an interview. Students were also given a list of six descriptors of reticent behaviors, and those who felt that they experienced some or all of these symptoms were asked to come for an interview at specified times.

Through the personal interviews the students were guided to a realistic assessment of their communication needs, and they were oriented to the goals and procedures of the program. The decision to enter the program was left up to the student. Ten students enrolled in the class.

Rhetoritherapy

The skills instruction was patterned after and included many of the same procedures as the Option D program, directed by Dr. Gerald Phillips, at the Pennsylvania State University. For a complete description of this program, the proceedings paper by DeBoer, Corey, and Metzger from the 1976 Speech Communication Association convention may be consulted.[23]

At both the beginning and the end of the course, students were required to write a paper describing what communication strengths and weaknesses they had and how they would like to communicate differently. Each student brought the first paper to an individual conference with one of the instructors. At this conference the instructor used the paper to help the student decide on his or her first communication goal. The paper at the end of the quarter enabled the student and the instructors to assess his or her progress. In the first two weeks of the course the process of goal preparation was taught using Robert Mager's book, Goal Analysis.[24] Receiving particular attention was the difference between desireable and "doable" goals. Desireable goals are vague statements of an intended state, as is, "to become a good communicator." Doable goals are statements of intended observable behaviors, as is, "to stand in front of the class and give a public speech for five minutes." With doable goals students are directed to specific preparatory activities, and they are able to measure their progress. With only a desirable goal reticent students have a propensity to disavow progress.

Students were required to set, accomplish, and report on at least three communication goals. The goals followed a gradual progression which started with an interpersonal communication goal such as striking up a conversation with a stranger at a party and which culminated with a public speech to the class; hence, the goals became succeedingly more difficult. For the most part students

made their own decisions about what goals to assume. This allowed the students to personalize the course and its content.

Systematic desensitization

Systematic desensitization was administered according to the detailed guidelines set forth in an article by Dr. James C. McCroskey.[25] The rationale for systematic desensitization was presented prior to the first systematic desensitization session. McCroskey's standard college hierarchy was utilized in all eight fifty-minute sessions of systematic desensitization. After about three sessions, it became apparent that some students were moving up the hierarchy more slowly than others. We, therefore, divided the class into a slow and a fast group. This measure particularily facilitated the apprehension reduction of students whose concerns were focused on the upper end of the hierarchy which referenced public speaking activities. Occasionally students indicated a suspicion that systematic desensitization may not be valuable for them. When such occurred, the rationale for systematic desensitization was again presented.

Theory instruction

Fundamental communication theory in the areas of intrapersonal communication, interpersonal communication, group communication, and public speaking was presented through a survey textbook and classroom lectures. Although several textbooks could have been selected, Communication by Larry Barker was employed.[26] To accent the theory, classroom activities such as the Johari Window exercise, group problem-solving exercises, job interview role plays, and impromptu speeches were conducted.

Exercises were selected and implemented with the needs of the students in mind. For example, we chose a problem-solving exercise which required participation from all group members in order to derive the correct answer. For the

job interviews two outsiders who had different interviewing styles interviewed students in separate classrooms before approximetely one-half of the students. Thus, by alternating the group of observers, each student observed both styles as well as experienced one style in his interview.

During the impromptu speaking exercise, students received feedback on their first speech and then attempted to incorporate this feedback in a second speech. This process of feedback and rehearsal was occassionally used in individual conferences with students before they implemented their goals. The students were able to practice their speeches, for example, in front of the instructor before they gave the speech in class. One other valuable exercise was a group sharing session on the performance of the first goal. By reporting on their individual difficulties and achievements, students were able to not only experience self-disclosure but also to see that their concerns were not necessarily unique to them. Above all, this exercise provided each member with group encouragement.

Grading

The grades awarded in the class were primarily awarded on a contract basis. Contract grading is viable in light of previous research which indicates that students have a greater decrease in speech anxiety if they are not subjected to pressures of grading.[27] Furthermore, the contract grading system is consistent with the philosophy that students make voluntary, individual commitments to enter the course and to improve on their communication.

Students were guaranteed a "C" in the course if they averaged "C" or better on the quiz on goal analysis and a test on communication theory, successfully completed three goals of which one was a public speech, completed both self-assessment papers, and attended regularly. A "B" or an "A" in the course required more goals, higher grades on the tests, and near perfect attendance.

Program Evaluation

To determine the degree of effectiveness of the special instruction, four data bases were tapped: communication apprehension levels as shown by the PRCA, instructor observations of behavior, student evaluations of the course and instructors, levels of perceived anxieties and skills. The latter data base resulted from a questionnaire which was a self-report of anxiety perceptions of communication anxiety and skill levels before the course and after the course. The areas addressed in this questionnaire were social conversation, group discussion, conversation with authority figures, and public speaking (see Exhibit A). To determine if the special instruction was more beneficial than regular instruction, the data from the special class were compared with that from a control group. The control group, like the special class, was drawn from fundamentals classes in speech communication, and the same screening procedure was employed. Constituting the control group were fourteen students who attended their regular classes as they normally would.

Levels of communication apprehension

With respect to differences between pre- and post-PRCA scores, the special class had a difference mean of 18.29 and a resultant t value of 3.18 which was significant at $p < .025$ level. With a difference mean of 6.85 and a t value of 1.65, the control group's apprehension change was not significant ($p = .126$). Although the difference between the groups' difference means was as high as 11.44 (score range was 0 - 125), it only approached significance ($t = 1.62$, $p = 1.23$). The low t value was undoubtedly due to extreme variance: individual change scores were as much as 22 points higher or 33 points lower than the mean change score.

Thus, at best, the results show that the special class significantly decreased in communication apprehension while the control group did not and that

the improvement of the special class approached significance when compared to that of the control group.

Instructor observation

As instructors of the special class we continually observed the behaviors and behavioral statements of the students. We noted dramatic increases in amounts of nonverbal expression, social interaction, class discussion, and positive (versus negative) statements of communication encounters. Especially interesting was the way the students personalized their learning. Rather than merely acknowledging an understanding of communication, a student would express his/her learning in terms of what he/she could now do. For example, instead of saying, "I have learned how people communicate with others," they would say, "I can now open up conservations." In general we concluded, that although progress varied among the students, all exhibited a significant reduction of anxiety and development of communication skills.

Unfortunately, due to complications in procedures and cooperation, observation data for the control group is negligable; nonetheless, three general themes were evident: 1) the reticent students participated little in discussions, 2) the reticent students demonstrated high anxiety in public communication situations, and 3) the reticent students progressed only moderately in their abilities to communicate effectively.

Incomplete as the control data is, we can only conclude that the special instruction helped students improve in their communication and that it is doubtful that similar improvement results from regular classroom instruction.

Levels of perceived anxieties and abilities

At the conclusion of the quarter each group responded to questionnaires which asked the students to assess levels of communication anxieties and skills they perceived they had both before and after completing the course. Calculations of t values for the special class revealed that all eight of the differences

between before and after assessments were significant at the $p < .01$ level. In other words, in the areas of group discussion, speaking with persons of higher status, striking up acquaintances and building friendships, and making oral reports, the students in the special class perceived large positive changes in both their anxieties and their abilities. For the control group, only four of the eight paired comparisons were significant at the $p < .01$ level, although six were significant at the $p < .05$ level. Not significant were the subjects' perceptions of the extent their abilities had changed in the two areas of speaking with persons of higher status and of striking up acquaintances and building friendships.

For each group cumulative change scores were calculated and compared. The resultant t of 2.42, significant at the $p < .025$ level, revealed that the special instruction led to a higher perception of progress than did regular instruction.

Course and instructor evaluations

Except for matters dealing with the textbook, the special class' mean ratings for all areas indexed by the course and instructor evaluation were 2.0 or lower. Translated according to the questionnaire's descriptors, these ratings indicate that the instruction in each area was from "above average" to "excellent." The two means pertaining to the textbook fell between "average" and "above average."

Compared to the control group's mean ratings for all areas indexed, the special class' mean ratings were more positive (lower). A t-test on the composite mean ratings indicated that the special class had a significantly more positive (lower) assessment of the instruction than did the control group ($t = 1.79$, $p < .05$).

Related to the course and instructor evaluations were three addendum items which were completed by those in the special class. The first item set

concerned the extent which the special foundations course was actually a threatening experience in comparison with the extent which the students previously thought a communication course would be threatening. No significant difference was found. The second item concerned the extent to which the students thought the special section should be available to other students with high communication anxiety. On a scale ranging from "1" as "very large extent" and "5" as "very little extent," the mean was 1.60. The final item concerned the extent which each student thought the course had benefited him/her. On a similar scale as the above item, the mean rating was 1.70.

Discussion

The progress attained by the students cannot be attributed specifically to systematic desensitization, rhetoritherapy, or other aspects of the special instruction. No doubt, the approaches collaborated in making the students comfortable and capable in communication. In any case, the argument over causes should not deny the effects of the instruction. They are a decrease in communication apprehension, an increase in communication skills, and a significant positive perception of progress.

For the reticent student the perception of improved abilities may be as important as the ability itself. Indeed, many reticent students appear capable of the variety of communication acts which they fear, but they are convinced that they are not capable. Thus,an important outcome of the special instruction is the students' significantly better perception of their progress than that attained by reticent students in the regular classroom.

Although not as effective as special instruction, regular instruction will yield some perceived progress. Unfortunately, not all reticent students will, nor can, endure the pain in order to experience the benefit. Even if all students stayed in regular communication classes, we could not, based on the results of

this study, expect them to experience either the breadth or the depth of perceived improvement as they would with special instruction.

The special class' comparatively better perception of progress very likely contributed to its comparatively higher evaluation of the course and the instructors. Although a number of factors may have influenced the assessment, we think that the primary reason that the evaluation is positive is that the students regarded the instruction as appropriate for them. In any case, in the view of the students, the combination of approaches which we employed was of high quality, and the special instruction was more satisfactory than regular classroom instruction.

For the reticent students, better instruction does not mean less threatening instruction. The special class regarded the course as a more threatening experience than what they had perceived a communication course would be. Several factors appear to have led to greater threat. First, the special class was small in size; consequently, the students could not as easily withdraw from class discussion as they normally would. Secondly, because two instructors were present in the small class, the students experienced more instructor contact than they usually experience. Third, class discussion and group exercises were commonplace activities that could not be avoided by the reticent students. Fourth, the special class was structured so that students moved to progressively more challenging communication acts; thus, they were not allowed to experience anxiety once and then relax.

Perhaps the most remarkable finding of this project is that inspite of the threat experienced in the special class, the students thought the class useful, and they highly recommended it for continuance. Apparently the students recognized value in engaging in the anxiety producing communication acts, and they found that the anxiety costs were offset by suitable developmental benefits.

Although the teaching strategies were instrumental in producing positive results, some other factors associated with the special class merit mention. First, a student's consideration of the session was likely an admission of a problem. By openly admitting the problem the student could deal with it directly. Second, a student's voluntary enjoinment to the section probably became a psychological commitment to work on the problem. Third, participation with only students who had the same problem likely became therapeutic in that a student could feel that the others understood him/her. Important to note is the fact that even these incidental contributions to success are not normally available in regular classroom instruction.

Alternatives to the Program

Although our method of instruction was successful, we recognize several things that could be done for improvement. With a class of more than ten students, it would be difficult to conduct classroom activities and still include an hour for systematic desensitization. Systematic desensitization could be offered as an out-of-class, required activity. Two reasonable scheduled sessions each week would accommodate the students.

To assist with systematic desensitization and classroom exercises, an instructor should have an assistant. One option is to acquire a capable speech communication major. Another is to use a student who has previously gone through the program. The usefulness of the latter option has been noted in a previous project.[28]

Because reticent students typically experience more apprehension in public speaking than in other communication activities, the systematic desensitization perhaps should be completed before the public speeches are given. Eight sessions of systematic desensitization normally yield a significant reduction of communication apprehension;[29] therefore, that part of the course can

usually be completed before two-thirds of the course is over.

The hierarchy of communication situations used in systematic desensitization may be determined by the class. Apprehension producing stimuli could be set forth and then rank ordered.

If time allowed and if the instructor obtained adequate training, cognitive restructuring could be included in the class activities. Class discussions could emphasize 1) how communication anxiety is often caused by illogical, self-defeating, and anxiety arousing thoughts; 2) how negative self-statements are identified; and 3) how coping statements are constructed and employed. The students could incorporate coping statements into their preparation for each communication goal. Coping statements could be listed on the preparation sheet and practiced as part of the respective preparatory activities. A thorough explanation of cognitive restructuring procedures has been reported by Fremouw and Scott.[30]

Conclusion

The strength of the combination approach appears to be that it addresses the students' problems whether they are in apprehension, deficient skills, or both. Because theoretical instruction can be offered in conjunction with the corrective measures, the entire program constitutes viable communication instruction.

One objection to some corrective programs is that insufficient money and time are available. The alternative instructional approach bypasses these objections because it does not require additional staff. In a multiple section course one already existing section may be designated as the alternate section. In other words, students with communication concerns resulting from high communication apprehension could be reassigned to a common section.

With severe communication apprehension and without communication skills students are disadvantaged in academic classrooms, in social interaction, and in vocational choices. Thus, their education is incomplete without learning to successfully communicate. Although regular instruction may help, it does not yield the positive results of specially designed instruction. The special instruction involving both systematic desensitization, and rhetoritherapy is the very kind of education that the reticent students need.

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PERCEPTIONS OF SKILLS QUESTIONNAIRE

Directions: Before beginning to respond to the questionnaire, record your social security number in the spaces provided on the mark sense form. No other information needs to be supplied at the top of the mark sense form. To respond to the questions, indicate by marking the space which corresponds to the extent which fits your perception.

		Very large extent				Very little extent
1.	To what extent did you feel comfortable and confident in participating in group discussions before taking this course?	1	2	3	4	5
2.	To what extent do you now feel comfortable and confident in participating in group discussions?	1	2	3	4	5
3.	To what extent do you think you had the ability to participate in group discussions before taking this course?	1	2	3	4	5
4.	To what extent do you now have the ability to participate in group discussions?	1	2	3	4	5
5.	To what extent did you feel comfortable and confident in speaking with persons of higher status (e.g., professors, bosses, policemen) before taking this course?	1	2	3	4	5
6.	To what extent do you think that you now feel comfortable and confident in speaking with persons of higher status?	1	2	3	4	5
7.	To what extent do you think that you had the abilities to speak with persons of higher status before taking this course?	1	2	3	4	5
8.	To what extent do you now have the abilities to speak with persons of higher status?	1	2	3	4	5
9.	To what extent did you feel comfortable and confident in striking up acquaintances and building friendships before taking this course?	1	2	3	4	5
10.	To what extent do you now feel comfortable and confident in striking up acquaintances and building friendships?	1	2	3	4	5
11.	To what extent do you think you had the abilities to strike up acquaintances and build friendships before taking this course?	1	2	3	4	5
12.	To what extent do you now have the abilities to strike up acquaintances and build friendships?	1	2	3	4	5

OVER

		Very large extent				Very little extent
13.	To what extent did you feel comfortable and confident in making oral reports in public situations before taking this course?	1	2	3	4	5
14.	To what extent do you now feel comfortable and confident in making oral reports in public situations ?	1	2	3	4	5
15.	To what extent do you think you had the abilities to make oral reports in public situations before taking this course?	1	2	3	4	5
16.	To what extent do you now have the abilities to make oral reports in public situations?	1	2	3	4	5